

## **Virginia Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability**



**Focus Group 6**

**Lynchburg, VA  
May 6, 2004  
Follow Up Report**

## **Introduction**

The Governor of Virginia has recognized the need to address interoperability in communities throughout the Commonwealth and has charged the Office of Public Safety to design a strategic plan for statewide interoperability. The involvement of local and statewide emergency responders is essential to the success of developing a Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan.

In order to develop a collaborative Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan, the Office of Public Safety is conducting six (6) focus group sessions, comprised mainly of informal and formal leaders from fire, law enforcement, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) departments. Additional representation includes public health, local and state agencies, in order to accurately capture local perspectives on the state of interoperable communications in Virginia.

The outcomes and purpose of the focus group sessions are as follows:

- ☐ Capture of local emergency responder perspectives on interoperable communications
- ☐ Shared understanding of interoperability issues specific to each region of VA
- ☐ Education and shared awareness of interoperability issues across stakeholder groups
- ☐ Attention paid to emergency responder commonalities as opposed to differences

Each focus group session is designed as a series of conversations centered on the following: interoperability, statewide and regional, as it relates to the current state, the case for why change needs to happen, the envisioned future state, recommended strategies to pursue, and barriers to achieving the future state.

## **Executive Summary**

The Lynchburg focus group session on May 6, 2004 provided valuable input from the local perspective for the development of the Statewide Communications Interoperability Strategic Plan. The focus group identified the following major initiatives to be considered during the strategic planning session on May 18<sup>th</sup>: (1) Get a mandate from legislature on interoperability

standards and procedures and (2) develop a regional test bed to refine system requirements and develop operational procedures for use, discipline, and hierarchy of command.

## Detailed Overview



### Current State

The objective of the Current State is to affirm the facts and identify the problems related to interoperability in day-to-day activities and mutual aid efforts.

The Lynchburg focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to Day-to-Day interoperability:

- Government leadership (state and local) lack the understanding of interoperability equipment with respect to: technology advances, equipment lifecycle, and business processes for a first responder agency
  - Vendors discontinue services/parts for older systems forcing agencies to purchase new equipment and systems
- Not able to depend on public switch networks to provide priority access for public safety users
  - During the Petersburg tornado, the media used cell phones as their primary means of communicating with one another; this resulted in reduced capacity for public safety's use of their cell phones in an emergency situation.
- Charlottesville police officers (campus, county, state, sheriffs deputies) can communicate with each other, but not with Fire and EMS responders

- Charlottesville has \$6 million in federal funding programmed for interoperability for their regional 800MHz system
- FCC actions/regulations have impacted agencies' technology and equipment usage and purchasing
  - Narrowbanding: Forced to split 25 kilohertz wide channel into two 12.5 channels, then split to four 6.25 channels
  - Public safety is being forced out of frequencies they have been using because FCC is selling to consumer providers, requiring public safety to request new frequencies
  - Spectrum is finite; with more consumer driven services, public safety is no longer the only consumer of spectrum
- SIRS is a vital, but limited, link for law enforcement to the state police
  - Lynchburg Police Department can communicate with the State Police through SIRS and a voice over IP interface
  - Technology is antiquated
  - Limited to the vehicle; not portable with the person
  - Car-to-car will work if (1) a separate radio is maintained in the vehicle, or (2) through patches if public safety 911 centers have newer radio consoles
- Lynchburg, Bedford, and Amherst operate on a shared 800MHz trunked system
  - Campbell County is not part of the 800MHz system, but is interfaced with the above 800MHz system with limited (conventional) capabilities
- Requests for proposals and contracting do not involve participating agencies early in the process
  - Department of Forestry has backed out of STARS because STARS is not able to accommodate a core requirement of DOF to achieve their mission

The Lynchburg focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to interoperability during a (mutual aid) major disaster:

- Lack of procedures to incorporate the arrival of outside and spontaneous responders into incident response
  - Example: At a tire fire incident multiple agencies were involved in the response from the local to the federal level. The local first responders onto the scene were able to communicate with each other but locals were not able to efficiently communicate with state and federal agencies.
  - Example: As the Coast Guard and National Guard entered an incident scene, local responders were forced to provide the federal responders with cell phones as a means of communication because the federal responders were not trained on push-to-talk equipment.
- Regional disaster drills are conducted annually
  - Drills are done to satisfy requirements

- No real learning occurs on the part of the first responders due to a lack of reflection and debrief on the incident response exercise
- Regional Emergency Operational Plans (EOPs) do not address interoperability
  - They only address local hazards and available local resources; not how to incorporate state and local resources when responding to disasters
  - localities are not familiar with neighboring jurisdictions' EOPs
  - many plans are outdated

### Case for Change

The objective of the Case for Change conversation is to discuss the consequences and implications if changes to Virginia's state of interoperable communications do not occur. The Case for Change statements should appeal to the emotions of individuals and result in action.

The Lynchburg focus group identified the following Case for Change:

- Interoperability is an investment in the lives of our citizens:
  - Responsibility of elected officials to invest in the safety of the community: property and lives of the citizens
  - Advanced technology and a regional approach to communication can prevent injury and property damage
- Investing in technology will enable local, state, and federal agencies to communicate directly at the scene and will:
  - Maximize response to any incident by:
    - Better utilizing personnel
    - Increasing interdepartmental awareness
  - Save money by:
    - reducing maintenance costs
    - leveraging existing systems and coordination
  - Establish a system that enables the closest unit available to the scene to respond
  - Increase buying power by:
    - moving toward a consumer driven market, rather than vendor driven
- Liability if no action is taken:
  - Danger to responders - information cannot be shared with other responders real-time to prevent injury
  - Danger to citizens - inability to receive information in a timely manner to protect themselves during life threatening disasters and hazards
- Communications has typically been the first part of the disaster response process to fail; however, it is the most important element for successful public safety

## Future State

The objective of the Future State conversation is to discuss what interoperability in Virginia should be.

The Lynchburg focus group highlighted the following elements of the Future State of communications interoperability in Virginia:

- There is a statewide interoperability system with the following elements:
  - Operated at the local level
  - Integrated VHF, UHF, 800MHz, satellite, video
  - 100% hardware compatibility
  - Coverage in rural and urban areas
  - Ability to communicate with any locality while traveling
  - Common standards and procedures, including clear text
  - Cross-jurisdictional maintenance agreements
- 25 Planning District Commissions work together for a common cause
- Ample funding is available for identified and appropriate technology
  - Opportunity exists to obtain regular funding through grants
- FCC views the needs of the public safety community as a priority
  - Supports public safety interoperability efforts by appropriately designating frequency allocations

## Strategy

The purpose of the Strategy conversation is to identify the fundamental strategic initiatives essential to successfully implement a statewide interoperability plan in Virginia.

The Lynchburg team identified the following critical initiatives to achieve communications interoperability statewide:

1. Obtain a published mandate from legislature on interoperability standards.
2. Develop a test bed to refine regional system requirements and operational procedures for use, discipline, and hierarchy of command.  
*Including evaluating the existing systems' compliance, risks, and compatibility with each other to establish a baseline*
3. Educate the Planning District Commissions on the urgency of the interoperability problem and integrate an interoperability planning section into the Planning District Commissions' All Hazard Mitigation Plan.

4. Develop comprehensive and integrated training for public safety to enhance awareness, build competency, and expand knowledge of response resources and capabilities available throughout the region.
5. Partner the public safety community to exert influence over vendors to move more toward a market driven by public safety needs.

### Barriers

The purpose of the Barriers conversation is to identify factors hindering the effort to achieve the Future State.

The Lynchburg team identified the following barriers to implementing a statewide plan for interoperability and followed with suggestions to break the barriers:

- Resistance from local government: being viewed as an unfunded mandate
  - Implement a mixed funding strategy. Seek funding from the state as well as federal grants from the Office of Domestic Preparedness, Department of Homeland Security
- Lack of a communication and marketing plan to link current interoperability efforts, such as STARS and SWAN, to this interoperability effort.
  - Use the Commonwealth Emergency Preparedness working group to fund and develop a communications and marketing strategy
- Obtain local support: existing local priorities take precedence over implementing statewide initiatives
  - Have the first responder community educate the public on the importance of interoperability and having the public commit to supporting the implementation of a statewide interoperability plan as a top local priority
  - Educate local decision makers on the benefit to the community in supporting the implementation of a statewide interoperability plan

### **Next Steps**

The outcomes from the six (6) regional focus group sessions will drive the strategic planning session so that the key initiatives identified can serve as the cornerstones of the Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan. The strategic planning session is scheduled to take place in Richmond, Virginia on May 18, 2004.

There is a strong commitment to maintain the communication flow between the Office of Public Safety and the participants of each focus group as the

planning for statewide interoperability in Virginia progresses. This report details the results of the Lynchburg focus group meeting and was distributed to the participants by Monday May 10, 2004. In addition, the results of the conversations with all six (6) focus groups will be made available to all participants by mid-May.



**Participants of the May 6, 2004 focus group meeting, in Lynchburg, Virginia, on VA Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability:**

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